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Woody, Thorny, and Predatory Forests: Grassland Transformations in the Nilgiris, South India

The pastoral Toda people of the Nilgiris (“Nil” for blue and “Giri” for mountains) in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu say things about their surroundings that suggest unruliness: they are dark, woody, thorny, and predatory, they say. An open and grassy landscape is a mid-twentieth-century memory; much afforestation has ensued since India gained independence in 1947. Grasslands are now patches or fragments in a landscape vegetated by eucalyptus wood lots, wattle thickets, and scotch broom undergrowth. The Toda find this landscape unruly, and my essay seeks to understand why by historicizing the reasons for this unruliness. The colonial conservation policy of preserving grasslands for their recreational amenities rendered the landscape vulnerable to post-independence development policies that were critical of such colonial patronage. When the landscape was afforested after independence, it was not only utilitarian concerns that formed nationalist rationale but also notions of sovereignty.

First, a disclaimer: not all Toda hamlets are in Wenlock Downs, a northwestern tract of the Nilgiris, which I specifically refer to as being unruly. Other Toda hamlets to the south and the west of the Nilgiris find themselves amidst woody vegetation, but there is a concentration of Toda hamlets in the Downs. As a lived-in region, they are visibly the most continuous afforested tract, and following the invasion of wattle and broom, they have come to resemble a runway landscape. On the Nilgiri Plateau I consider the Todas who live and work in the Downs to be most vulnerable to predatory risk and environmental stress, more so than other Todas and other communities. A brief anthropological and geographical introduction to the Toda and their grasslands is useful here.

Only 1,319 of the 2,498 grassy acres defined as Toda patta land (“patta” refers to an individual land title or right) are in the Downs. Toda patta lands are a common land tenure, created for the Toda in 1882; in 1893 these grasslands were included in the Madras Forest Act. A legally sanctioned common tenure managed under forest rules is unique in India: in British and independent India lands are normally held individually and are subject to revenue rules. But the British patronized the Toda, like they did their grasslands. The British created a special land tenure for the Toda, since the latter was

perceived, through the racially tinted colonial gaze, to have an assemblage of strange traits differing from common “native” traits. A robust physique, their peculiar language, the barreled houses in which they dwelled, and the possession of intimidating wide-horned buffaloes (*Bubalis bubalis*)—all formed this exotic assemblage. Because Toda grasslands also contained stunted tropical evergreen coverts called “sholas,” and lay adjacent to forest reserves, they were brought under the forest administration’s jurisdiction. With this brief history of Toda commons—and the disclaimer that not all Toda pastures are unruly, or that all Toda are vulnerable to such unruliness in their everyday lives—let me briefly narrate a controversy of the 1950s surrounding the beauty and utility of the Downs, which resulted in decisions that rendered them “unruly.” We can then conclude with a more detailed discussion of landscape unruliness as the Toda experience it.

Toda Heartland becomes English Heartland

For millennia the Toda grazed and burned the upper Nilgiri Plateau in the northwest. They also intently maintained an open and grassy landscape. The dominance of grass was anthropocentrically maintained whatever the other biotic and climatic dynamics. Ecologists have suggested that annual fires also facilitate grassland dominance, although the presence of ground frost has also been linked to preventing the establishment of shola forest species. On this open and grassy landscape the Toda herded, penned, and milked their livestock, and sang about these broad-horned beasts and the endless open and green vistas; the landscape was at once a material achievement and a symbolic archive. The British sentimentally appropriated this landscape for its resemblance to that of their undulating, grassy, and marshy homeland.

In the 1950s, after independence, the forest bureaucracy sought to hasten an afforestation scheme for the Downs proposed when the Second World War had ended. The last British collector, along with the hill station elite whom he had mobilized, strongly resisted the scheme. At this point, the Downs were being “maintained” as a national park.¹ The tract provided amenities to the English, who used it for activities such as horse riding, jackal hunting, and subjecting the Toda to colonial ethnographic inquiry. It was English heartland, but it was here that a change of heart came about: the Downs

1 Siddhartha Krishnan, “Maintaining the Lord Wenlock Downs of the Nilgiris, South India, as a National Park: Public Recreation, Game Preservation, Aesthetic Heritage and Popular Will (1930–1950),” unpublished manuscript.

were in fact Toda heartland, as Anthony Walker, an English anthropologist, wrote in his *The Toda of South India* (1986). This “transplant” of heart had less to do with the Toda losing interest in the area and more with the English institutionalization of their leisure and lifestyle interests: 20,000 acres were reserved for recreation and pasturage, and in 1900 the tract was anointed the “Lord Wenlock Downs.” When the Second World War broke out and forest officials proposed the commercial production of wattle across 6,000 acres on the Nilgiris, records suggest that the Downs were also targeted. Other English bureaucrats, including collector MacQueen, saw the region’s beauty as a respite from the dynamic “rush of modern life.” The Downs deserved to be a national park, he argued. Deferring to preservationist sentiment, the government, while reasoning it unnecessary to legislate the Downs as a national park, passed an executive order that they be maintained as if they were. The Wenlock Downs Committee was established to oversee the maintenance and report periodically.²

The war ended in 1945 and India became independent in 1947. The Downs Committee discussed the question of passing legislation for the Downs to be designated a national park. The committee felt that, with a popular government in power, formal legislation to constitute the Downs as such “should have popular appeal,” and the possibility of a hydroelectric scheme that could inundate the grasslands also influenced the committee’s decision to propose legislation to the government. The committee was worried about the prospects that inundation posed for Toda grazing. Despite much bureaucratic discussion, the government never passed legislation.

In the mid-1950s, a bureaucratic argument of consequence broke out between McLaughlin, the last British collector, who worried about the aesthetic effects of development, and Subramaniam, a South Indian Chief Conservator of Forests (CCF), who sought to tap the Downs’ economic potential. The 1939 afforestation scheme had not progressed well, but it gained traction post-independence. The CCF sought to fast-track the scheme. Whilst McLaughlin believed that the Downs was the most beautiful landscape in the world, Subramaniam saw revenue and employment potential for an impoverished nation. In the end, the nationalist notion of utility prevailed, and the government allowed the wattle plantations.

2 I discuss this interesting case of a landscape being maintained as a national park without being legislated as one, in my forthcoming paper “Maintaining the Lord Wenlock Downs of the Nilgiris.”

A Subaltern Sense of Unruliness

Excessive British patronage attracted criticisms of being elitist, and this rendered the Downs more vulnerable to post-independence afforestation. The unintended risk of this afforestation is a hostile, woody, invasive, thorny, and predatory landscape. Tigers and leopards prey upon buffaloes from wattle thickets and thorny undergrowth; there is anxiety when schoolchildren, working husbands, and grazing buffaloes fail to arrive before the light fades. Consequently, the Todas find today's landscape stressful and are nostalgic about the grassy open land of the past; some elders refer to the period when the British hunted tigers on the Downs. But the Toda narrative is problematic: the tiger population in the upper Nilgiris, a sparse one historically, has in fact receded further. So why are tigers felt to be a greater problem today? The Toda say that tigers have historically been present in the Nilgiris, but claim that attacks were only occasional. Carnivores were conspicuous in an open landscape but are concealed in today's woody and thorny one. One Toda said: "Earlier you would know what is in an area in a single glance. Now if you go and look for your buffaloes, you know they are there but you have to first find one, get it to one place, then go looking for the others. As a result, you really do not know what's happening in there."³ The disquiet of the Toda over loss of visibility is palpable when they recollect communication between hamlets in the past: they would flash mirrors at each other, and hamlets could be seen at distances. Now everything has become "kagar," or "darkness."

3 A more detailed and comparative discussion of tigers in Toda land can be found in Sunetro Ghosal, Skogen Ketil, and Siddhartha Krishnan, "Negotiating Change: Exploring Social Construction of Landscapes and Interpretations of Large Carnivores in India and Norway," *Conservation and Society*, in press. There is no official record of number of tiger attacks and kills. Compensation records usually serve as evidence, but the Toda do not claim compensation, saying that they end up spending more than they would receive. Transport costs are involved in getting to the Forest Department in Ooty, also greasing administrative palms. But tiger sightings are said to have increased during the past decade, and there is also the occasional instance of a veterinarian certifying a carnivore attack.

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